

19th Century Quakers in Iowa

By: R. Glenn York

rgyork@rgy.com

The Society of Friends, commonly known as Quakers, played a significant role in the early settlement of Iowa. Their presence began in 1835 with the arrival of Isaac Pidgeon and Arron Street in Henry County, where the town of Salem was soon established.

Quaker was originally a slang name for Religious Society of Friends – Now an accepted name.

If you have ancestors in the mid-west before 1776 you have a 50/50 chance of having Quaker ancestors.

The Religious Society of Friends was started in Northwest England about 1650 by George Fox.

Non-conformists (people that did not participate in the Church of England) were persecuted in England and other places.

Quakerism arrived in North America by 1656.

Quaker Records

Meeting structure

- Monthly meetings
- Quarterly meetings
- Yearly meetings
- Preparatory Meetings

Monthly Meeting minutes have the most valuable genealogical information. Men and women maintained separate records books. Often the same events were documented in both sets of records.

Births, deaths, transfers, and disciplinary actions are recorded.

Consider a Quaker wedding: The couple will appear before both the men's and the women's meetings to declare their intention to marry. Both meetings will appoint members to investigate the couple and determine their "clearness" to marry. This investigation will verify whether they are not married or engaged to someone else, their behavior is acceptable to the standards of the meeting, and they are in good standings in their meeting. The following month the couple would appear and re-declare their intention and the members that had investigated them would report to the meeting. If everything was in order the wedding was approved and the meeting would appoint members to attend the wedding to ensure it was conducted appropriately. (Note: In some cases, one member of the couple may be a member of a different monthly meeting and will need to request a certificate to transfer their membership.)

When a family decides to move, they request a certificate from their current meeting identifying the meeting they plan to join. When they arrive at the new meeting, they present the certificate and are

received on the certificate. The "Certificate" was basically a letter stating the member was in good standing with the meeting they were leaving and they had settled any outstanding debts.

When a member does something "contrary to discipline" they may be reported to the meeting. The meeting will investigate the event and decide what actions should be taken. This could range from a warning to a disownment (removal from the meeting). In some cases, a disowned member may return to the monthly meeting to acknowledge their misdeeds and actions they have taken to prevent recurrence then ask to be reinstated in the meeting. A disownment means the former member cannot attend or participate in the meeting business sessions, but they can attend worship meetings

William Wade Hinshaw an Iowa Quaker and retired Opera singer spent the last 20 years of his life finding and indexing Quaker records. He published five volumes of the "Encyclopedia of American Quaker Genealogy". After his death, a sixth volume was published, and others have published many more indexes based on his work.

Quakermeetings.com is a site with a database of known meetings in North America. This database provides detailed information about the meetings including location, active dates, dates of surviving records, and location of records and histories.

Separations

In the 1800s the Religious Society of Friends experienced a series of separations where members disagreed on doctrine, and some groups broke off to form new meetings. In some cases, these new meetings used the same meeting name.

Migrations

Early American Quakers came to Massachusetts, Mid-Atlantic states, and Barbados in the early 1660s.

William Penn founded Pennsylvania in 1682, and many Quakers came to Pennsylvania in the late 1600s.

Many Quakers migrated south to the Carolina region in the mid-1700s.

They became uncomfortable with slavery and when the Northwest Territory opened with a prohibition of slavery in the late 1780s many migrated to Ohio and Indiana.

As country opened west of the Mississippi, migrations continued west to Iowa and Kansas early in the 19th century.

After the Civil War, Quakerism spread to many western states.

Quakers Come to Iowa

Quakers moved west, coming into Iowa and Kansas in the early 19th century. Isacc Pidgeon came to Henry County in 1835 and started the first Quaker settlement in Iowa. He and a few others established the first Quaker meeting there in 1838 with nine families. Movement from Ohio and Indiana continued into southeast Iowa and the population in the 1850s grew to 1,500 to 2,500 Quakers and by 1860 forty-five meetings were active across 18 counties. In 1866, the church census recorded 7,652 members in Iowa.

After the initial settlement in the Salem area, Quaker communities quickly spread to Jefferson, Mahaska, Linn, Cedar, and Keokuk counties. In the 1850s, the settlements near Bangor in Marshall County and near Earlham in Dallas County started what became the Western Plains and Bear Creek Monthly Meetings.

By the 1870s there were eight quarterly meetings established in Iowa:

- Bangor in Marshall County
- Bear Creek in Guthrie County
- Honey Creek in Hardin County
- Linn Grove in Jasper County
- Oskaloosa in Mahaska County
- Salem in Henry County
- South River in Warren County
- Springdale in Cedar County
- Winneshiek in Winneshiek County

Initially the Iowa meetings were under the Indiana Yearly Meeting. In 1863, the orthodox branch of the Indiana Yearly Meeting set off the Iowa Yearly Meeting. The Iowa Yearly Meeting opened in the ninth month 10th day of 1863.

Quaker communities in Iowa continued to grow north and west from Henry County and over the first few years they kept growing as one body under the Iowa Yearly Meeting but in 1877 a conflict that came up in what is known as the Quaker Divide. The conflict was related to the doctrine. Most Quakers had been raised in a silent meeting format where participants set in silence until they felt led to share something. In the 1870s some meetings started having ministers leading services. Early in 1877, some members left a meeting at Bear Creek and held a separate meeting nearby. Throughout the year more Friends left other meetings and during the Yearly Meeting in the fall of 1877 a group of conservative friends started a new Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative). Two separate Iowa Yearly Meetings have existed since then.

Quaker population within Iowa grew from the 1830s and continued to grow even through the Quaker Divide in the 1870s to where they reached their historic peak of 12,289 members in 1892 by then many Quakers had already moved on West and the Iowa yearly meeting was heavily involved in establishing meetings in other states. In 1893, the Iowa yearly meeting set off the Oregon Yearly Meeting, in 1895 they set off the California Yearly Meeting and in 1908 they said off the Nebraska Yearly Meeting. Iowa Yearly Meeting membership dropped as members were transferred to these new yearly Meetings.

Iowa Quakers were involved with the Underground Railroad. The southern Iowa border was shared with the slave state of Missouri so many slaves escaped to the free state of Iowa. Quakers often sheltered and hid these slaves as they assisted them in moving on north and east to escape toward Canada. Many Quaker homes had hidden rooms where escaped slaves could stay until they could be moved to the next safe house.

John Brown spent the Winter of 1857-58 near the Springdale Quaker community. He and his men lodged and trained on the farm of William Maxson. The men often interacted with the local Quakers. When he left Iowa and headed to Harpers Ferry, two Iowa Quaker brothers Edwin and Barclay Coppoc

joined his group. Edwin was captured and hung with John Brown. Barclay escaped and returned to Iowa where he was soon disowned from the meeting. He later fled to Canada to avoid arrest.

Education has always been a priority for Quakers, and it was no different in Iowa. Several local meetings started schools in their local communities soon after they settled in a new area. They have started Academies in at least six locations.

- Ackworth
- Earlham
- Hartland
- Hesper
- New Providence
- Pleasant Plain

Josiah White, a Quaker from Pennsylvania, worked with Indiana Yearly Meeting in 1850 to start White's Iowa Manual Labor Institute near Salem. This school intended to be a school for poor children, white, colored, and Indian. Mister White got sick and died soon after starting the school and the school struggled after it was transferred from Indiana Yearly Meeting to Iowa Yearly Meeting.

The Iowa Quakers started two colleges, Penn College in Oskaloosa which was later renamed William Penn University is still in operation. Whittier College in Salem was started in 1869 but struggled to maintain funding and it closed in 1910.

Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative) started Scattergood Boarding school in Cedar County in 1890. This school is still in operation.

Iowa Quakers worked with other Quaker groups on some Indian schools including the Osage Agency Manual Labor Boarding school in Indian Territory (Oklahoma).

IOWA QUAKER RECORDS

Hinshaw's abstracts from Iowa Quaker meetings were published by Selby Publishing in Kokomo, Indiana in ten volumes, however it appears this company has shut down. Some of the index cards where the records were abstracted have been photographed and are online. The original cards are at Swarthmore College near Philadelphia; PA. Transcripts of these cards are available at the William Penn University Library.

Original records of the Iowa Yearly Meeting are stored in Oskaloosa at the Yearly Meeting offices. The Iowa Yearly Meeting (Conservative) records are in the Iowa Historical Society in Iowa City. Some local meetings have copies stored locally. In 1996 and 1998 Iowa Humanities Council microfilmed many of the Iowa meeting records. Copies of these microfilmed copies are at the Iowa Historical Society in Iowa City. Copies are also available at several other Quaker college research facilities including:

- Earlham College – Richmond, IN
- Haverford College – Haverford, PA
- Guilford College – Greensboro, NC
- Friends University – Wichita, KS

Since many Iowa Quakers belonged to meetings in Indiana or Ohio you may find records about them in these states. Many Iowa Quakers that moved on west may be in Quaker records in the areas where they settled after leaving Iowa.

References / further reading:

1. Acton, Richard, "[*The Story of Ann Raley: Mother of the Coppoc Boys*](#)", *The Palimpsest*, Spring 1991, pages 20-33, available at: <https://hd.housedivided.dickinson.edu/node/10258> (accessed 5/19/2026)
2. Arnold, Lisa Parry, "*Thee & Me; A Beginner's Guide to Early Quaker Records*"
3. Bangor Liberty Friends Church - History <https://blfchurch.org/about/history/> (accessed 5/5/2026)
4. Bedell, L. Frank, "*Quaker heritage: Friends Coming into the Heartland of America: A Story of Iowa Conservative Yearly Meeting*", 1966, Cono Press
5. Berry, Ellen Thomas & Berry, David Allen, "*Our Quaker Ancestors; Finding Them in Quaker Records*" 2nd edition
6. Elliott, Errol T., "*Quakers on the American Frontier*", 1969, Friends United Press
7. Brief History of Iowa Yearly Meeting of Friends (Conservative) https://www.iymc.org/iymcfaithpractice/#_BRIEF_HISTORY (accessed 5/5/2026)
8. Cindi's list Quaker resources include many links to other resources on-line <https://www.cyndislist.com/quaker/> (accessed 5/5/2026)
9. Cook, Darius B., "*History of the Quaker Divide: struggles and accomplishments of settlers; the story of their achievements forms interesting reminiscences in the history of early days, meetings, schools, farm, and home life*", 1914, The Dexter Sentinel (Can be downloaded from FamilySearch.org)
10. FamilySearch "*U. S. Quaker Research (Society of Friends)*" [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/U.S. Quaker Research \(Society of Friends\)?fbclid=IwAR1Fydx7xSbMdoRH0IjPLI4TJxyxFR4Kno1wfW3FIVtiRDTjn5Ri03OW-c](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/U.S._Quaker_Research_(Society_of_Friends)?fbclid=IwAR1Fydx7xSbMdoRH0IjPLI4TJxyxFR4Kno1wfW3FIVtiRDTjn5Ri03OW-c) (accessed 5/5/2026)
11. Folsom, Bruce A., "*Our History: 150 Years of Friends in San Francisco*", 2010, updated 2014 <https://sfquakers.org/about-us/our-history/our-history-150-years/> (accessed 5/22/2026)
12. Iowa Yearly Meeting, "*1863-1963 Spiritual Trails of a People Called Friends*" Book I

13. Iowa Yearly Meeting, *"1963-1988 Spiritual Trails of a People Called Friends"* Book II
14. Iowa Yearly Meeting of Friends – History <https://iaym.org/aboutus/history/> (accessed 5/5/2026)
15. Jones, Louis Thomas, *"The Quakers of Iowa"*, 1914, State Historical Society of Iowa
<https://dn790007.ca.archive.org/0/items/quakersofiowa00jonerich/quakersofiowa00jonerich.pdf> (accessed 5/5/2026)
16. Leeper, Jean, *"Josiah White and his White's Iowa Manual Labor Institute"* 2009 available at:
<https://sites.rootsweb.com/~ialqm/White'sInstitute.html> (accessed 5/20/2026)
17. Standing, Herbert C., *"Historical Notes Concerning the Conservative Friends at Bear Creek (1977)"*
Downloadable at: <https://bearcreekhistory.com/2025/07/14/historical-notes-concerning-the-conservative-friends/>
18. Mott, Joanna Bowles, *"Ephraim Bowles, His Quaker Heritage"* 1954 (Out of Print – Can be downloaded from FamilySearch.org)
19. Northwest Yearly Meeting Historical Statement <https://nwfriends.org/history> (accessed 5/5/2026)
20. *"The William Wade Hinshaw Iowa Quaker Meeting Records: Monthly Meetings"* volumes 1-10, published by Selby Publishing and Printing
21. Quakermeetings.com – database of North American Quaker meetings contains many valuable details about each meeting <https://quakermeetings.com/> (accessed 5/5/2026)
22. Quakermeetings.com – Yearly Meetings page <https://quakermeetings.com/yearly-meetings> (accessed 5/5/2026)
23. Quakers in Oregon https://oregonencyclopedia.org/articles/quakers_in_oregon/#.XYIjGyhKiUk (accessed 5/5/2026)
24. Quaker Migrations – Additional Sources
<http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~mygermanfamilies/family/QuakerMigr.html> (accessed 5/5/2026)
25. *"Research Guide to Finding Your Quaker Ancestors"*
<https://www.ancestrycdn.com/mars/landing/quaker/quaker-guide.pdf> (accessed 5/5/2026)